

Big Issue

A matter of conscience

The clocks went back two weekends ago and the weather has been increasingly chilly. While I've been deliberating over whether to turn the heating up and burn more fossil fuels, something else has been on my conscience. As Christmas rapidly approaches, once again I wonder what it's like to be turning in for the night in some cold, dark alleyway in the middle of town. Today, I went to find the girl I've been buying the Big Issue from for more than a year and asked her.

Dundee City Centre

Do you mind giving me your name?

Maggie.

And do you mind telling me how old you are?

22.

How long have you been selling the Big Issue?

Couple o' years.

Would you tell me a bit about how you came to be homeless and selling the Big Issue?

Oh, well... it all started when I was younger. It's a long story, really.

You don't have to tell me about your personal situation if you feel uncomfortable. Just tell me, generally, how some people might find themselves homeless and selling the Big Issue.

People have a lot of different reasons. Some people were in care when they were younger and they just don't know what to do. A lot of people leave their foster parents and think they'll automatically get a flat. You don't realise you won't. It's a cruel world. When I was about 10 or 11, I went into foster care but it's not like a parent, child relationship. They did their own thing and I did my own thing. There wasn't really much more than that. They did try but it wasn't like having a proper family. They sometimes tried to get me to join in and they bought me Christmas presents and stuff but — it was probably me, really. I just wanted to do my own thing.

Would you describe to me what happens in a typical day for you?

Every day is the same: I get up and collect the Big Issues from Panmure Street and try to sell some.

Where do you get up from? What I mean is: where do you sleep?

In a sleeping bag in a close somewhere.

Do you have to have money to buy the Big Issues you sell?

Yes, when you start — on the very first day you start you're given five to get started then you have to save money to go back and buy more.

How many copies do you sell in a day?

I usually sell 5, 10 — depends.

Do you have to buy food as well?

Yes, I buy some food with the money from my sales and the rest goes on more copies to sell and that's how I keep saving more and being able to buy more copies. On a Friday we can go to next to the Overgate and get a meal and a cup of tea from the Salvation Army.

What about washing, like getting a bath or a shower?

We can pay to get a shower at the swimming pool.

What support is available to you within the community? Is there a social worker who can help you or a drop in centre or anything like that?

Just the Salvation Army as far as I know. They give us a thick sleeping bag and food, sometimes.

Who can you turn to if you need help with making decisions? Do you have friends or anyone you can talk to?

No-one, really. I go about on my own. I do have some friends but I don't go about with other Big Issue sellers.

Can you get medical treatment if you need it?

Yes, I have my own doctor I've always been registered with.

What will you be doing five years from now?

Hopefully, will have got my own flat, got a job and stuff. I want to work in a nursing home or something like that.

What will you be doing on Christmas Day?

Just the same as any other day but no 'Issues' to sell. I just go about on my own. Last year, Christmas Day was a very long day.

What if you're ill with flu or anything?

I have to carry on as usual. I don't have time to lie about.

It must be scary sleeping up a close on your own at night?

Aye, it is — VERY, and you do get the people who will move you on so, you have to pick a good spot.

Maggie declined to go to a café for a coffee as she didn't want to miss any sales. 'It goes quiet after about one and I've still got all these to sell but, if you wouldn't mind getting me a hot chocolate from a take-away, I'd be very grateful. And it would heat my hands up 'cos they're frozen.'